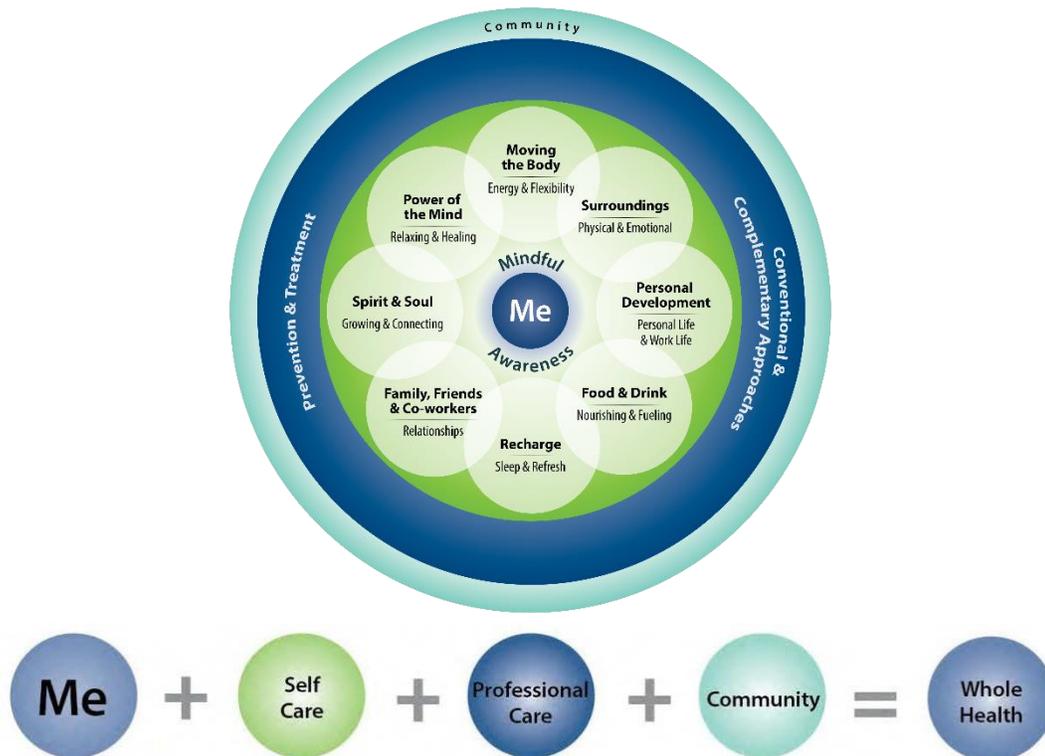


WHOLE HEALTH: INFORMATION FOR VETERANS

An Introduction to Personal Development



Whole Health is an approach to health care that empowers and enables YOU to take charge of your health and well-being and live your life to the fullest. It starts with YOU. It is fueled by the power of knowing yourself and what will really work for you in your life. Once you have some ideas about this, your team can help you with the skills, support, and follow up you need to reach your goals.

All resources provided in these handouts are reviewed by VHA clinicians and Veterans. No endorsement of any specific products is intended. Best wishes!

<https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/>

An Introduction to Personal Development

What is Personal Development?

Personal Development is a part of the Circle of Health that focuses on different ways you can grow in different areas of your life. What can you do to make your life better?

Examples of Personal Development include the following:

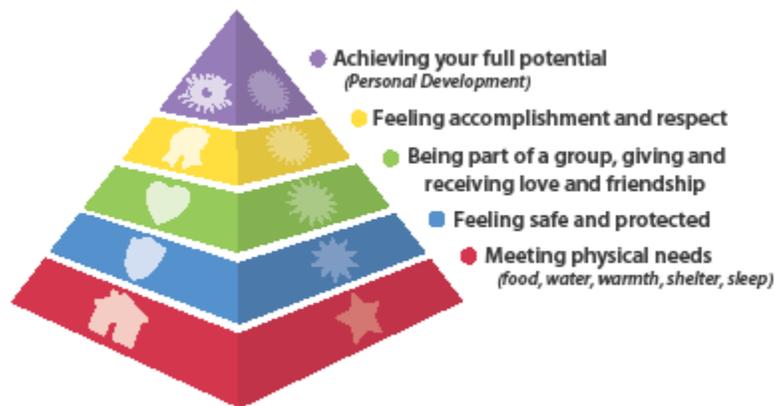
- Becoming better at something, such as a talent or a skill
- Education
- Managing your finances and other resources
- Volunteering
- Being creative
- Setting and reaching goals
- Bringing more humor and laughter into your life
- Becoming more compassionate
- Practicing forgiveness
- Making work better. This applies whether you have a job you are paid to do, or if you are doing volunteer work, taking care of loved ones, or doing projects at home.

Working on any part of the Circle of Health can be considered Personal Development. This handout covers several areas to keep in mind.

Why should I focus on Personal Development as part of my health plan?

Personal Development can help you be happier and healthier. It is about giving yourself more options and more control over your life. The more you have working in your favor in your life, the more you can achieve.

Abraham Maslow was a psychologist who was interested in what makes people happy. He believed that people have a strong desire to become all they can be. He pointed out, though, that it is much easier to grow as a person if you can meet your basic needs first.¹ Maslow's theory of hierarchical needs is often shown as a pyramid.



Once you meet the needs at the bottom of the pyramid, it is easier to meet the ones that are higher up. People can meet the needs at the top of the pyramid even if other things are missing from lower down, but that is not always easy. This is where Personal Development fits in. You can think about how things are going for you at each level and then decide what you want to do to make things better. Attending to all these areas of your life means moving closer to being at your best. That can lead to greater success in health and life. It can also empower you to do more to protect and improve your health.

When you work on your Personal Development, set realistic goals. Remember, it is not a sign of weakness to ask for help with that. Let your support team be there for you. Studies find that asking for help and setting goals can help people feel more balanced and empowered.² Some VA sites are now offering Whole Health coaches and Peer Partners who can help you set goals and check in with you as you work to reach them. Ask about whether you can work with someone like this at your local VA site.

How does mindful awareness tie in to Personal Development?

Try to bring mindful awareness into your Personal Development efforts. Your mind and body are sending you messages all the time. Being mindful means paying attention to those messages and asking, “What do I need right now to make my life better?” Ask yourself, with each of the different parts of Maslow’s pyramid, “Where am I now, and where do I want to be?” That is the first step toward making healthy changes.

If you ignore messages from your body or fail to pay attention to your emotions, you might miss a chance to prevent health problems from happening. For example, ongoing tension between you and a family member or coworker can contribute to depression. Physical discomfort can progress into chronic pain.

To learn more about mindful awareness, reference the handout, “[An Introduction to Mindful Awareness](#).”

Where do I start?

After you have taken some time to think about how things are going and what you would like to change, you can decide where you want to start. The rest of this handout covers four different areas of Personal Development it is helpful to think about. Each section starts with different questions. If the questions interest you, it is probably worth it to focus more on that area.

1. Explore your values.

Questions to ask yourself:

- What is my typical day like?
- How would I change my day if I could?
- If someone who did not know me saw how I spent my day, what would they assume about what is important to me?
- What matters to me? Why do I want to have my health?
- What are my passions?

Personal Development is about moving toward what matters most to you. To do that, you need to be clear about your values. What are you working toward? What do you care about to the point where you will take extra time and effort to bring it into your life more? To explore these questions more, review the handout "[What Matters Most? Exploring Your Values.](#)"

2. Find ways to balance work with the other parts of your life.

Questions to ask yourself:

- What types of work do I find most rewarding?
- What helps me to do my best work?
- What does a balanced life look like for me?
- How balanced is my life right now, and how can I increase balance?

Work does not have to come with a paycheck to count as work. Taking care of the house, children, or other family members is work. Volunteering your time and taking care of your health are also work.

Here are some tips for finding better balance.

- **Balance work with other areas of your life.** Think about who can help you find balance in your life. Create a list of goals, and then identify who you could ask to help with them. Some examples might be family members, co-workers, friends, mentors, nurses, doctors, and therapists. Asking for help is a great strength to have and use. It shows that you can identify the right person for the job and make your work easier. You might want to review the Whole Health handouts about "[Family, Friends, and Coworkers.](#)"
- **Find satisfaction in your work life.** Having goals can improve your work satisfaction. Think of a SMART goal for work. What do you want to accomplish this week? What about this month, or this year? An example of a SMART goal related to work might be, "Starting this week, I will work toward completing this project by doing one thing at a time. My first task will be [insert task here] and I will work on it for an hour each work day until I check in with my boss in two weeks. I will know I am successful with this when..." Remember to keep your goals realistic. Work goals can be hard to accomplish on your own so remember to use available resources and ask how you can best achieve your goal. It always helps to have support. Some VA's have vocational rehabilitation programs that might be useful. Be sure to ask what your local VA offers.
- **Improve your finances.** For more general information and guidance, consider meeting with a financial planner. If you struggle to pay for medications, make an appointment with a social worker to learn about available resources. The VA also has several resources for understanding home loans, education benefits, and more. If you need more information on a financial topic, the VA can help you find the right resource. Ask for more information at your local site, and check out

<https://www.benefits.va.gov/insurance/bfcs.asp> to learn about options for financial advice through the VA.

To focus more on this area, refer to the handout, "[Finding Balance](#)."

3. Focus on how you want to spend your free time.

Questions to ask yourself:

- How much free time do I have?
- What do I usually do during my free time?
- Is there something I would like to do more during free time?
- How can I use my free time for more Personal Development?

It isn't necessary to have a specific purpose or end goal for activities you do during your free time. Try doing something fun and silly just because you want to. Here are some other ideas to consider.

- **Be more creative.** Creativity can help you relax, feel like you are getting more done, and be happier.³ How do you express yourself creatively? This might be through writing, drawing, sculpting, dancing, gardening, and more! If you find that you don't have time to be creative, consider setting a SMART goal. How many minutes are doable for you? How many days in a week or a month do you want to spend on a creative activity? What do you want to do? An example might be "Starting next week, I will draw for 30 minutes once a week, each Saturday afternoon during my free time." As with all SMART goals, be realistic about what you can do. Try not to judge what you create too much; just enjoy.
- **Be a lifelong learner.** Education can increase income⁴ and decrease stress. Research also shows that education rejuvenates your mind and body⁵ and slows aging.⁶ One way to measure the health of cells is by looking at how long telomeres are. Telomeres are at the end of the strands of your DNA. When you have fewer telomeres, it is harder for cells to create more cells. The longer and healthier your telomeres, the longer you live. Learning new things seems to protect your telomeres.

While you are learning, your brain is making new connections. This can help prevent dementia. Is there something you have always wanted to learn? It can be practical, like how to use a computer program. It can be creative, like a pottery class. It can be physical, like a Pilates or step aerobics class. Or it can be something you choose to learn just because you want to, like a scuba diving class. At some schools, you can sit in on classes, so you don't have to pay or be graded. Check with the school and instructor to see if this is possible. Be sure to see what is offered at your local VA. For example, most VA sites have recreational therapy classes that can be both fun and educational. You can learn more at

<https://www.prosthetics.va.gov/rectherapy/index.asp>.

- **Volunteer.** Volunteering can give you a sense of accomplishment and help you make new friends.⁷ Some studies show volunteering can help you live longer, function better, and even have less heart disease.⁸ Consider volunteering at a soup kitchen or contacting a non-profit group you admire to see how you can help. You could even volunteer at the VA and help other Veterans. As with the other topics, consider setting a SMART goal for this. Be careful not to take on more than you can handle. Start small, like volunteering one day a month. Although volunteering is listed here in the free time section, it also can be thought of as a form of work.

4. Become more confident and able to face challenges.

Questions to ask yourself:

- What are my strengths, and how do they help me deal with challenges?
- How can I build on my strengths?
- When do I feel overwhelmed, and what makes me feel that way?
- How do I feel about my future? What can I do to give myself a better future?
- What other skills would I like to have?

Resilience means being able to bounce back from life's challenges. Studies show that the following skills can help you to be more resilient.⁹

- **Offer random acts of kindness.** A random act of kindness is when you do something nice for a stranger without expecting anything in return. These acts can be small, like holding the elevator door for someone, or big, like paying someone else's bill. Studies find that if you do a random act of kindness, you are likely to feel happier¹⁰ and more satisfied with life.¹¹ If this interests you, consider starting with a SMART goal that focuses on one random act of kindness a week. See how it makes you feel. The goal can evolve as you get a better sense of what you can do and what you want to do. You can change your SMART goal as you think is best for your life.
- **Be optimistic and hopeful.** If you practice mindful awareness, you see patterns with how you relate to the world. We know that people can learn to have a more positive attitude, and that can have health benefits. To learn more, refer to the Whole Health handout "[The Healing Power of Hope and Optimism.](#)"
- **Practice gratitude.** Like hope, gratitude – truly being thankful and counting our blessings – can be a powerful approach to Personal Development. Refer to the Whole Health handout "[Create a Gratitude Practice.](#)"
- **Have self-compassion.** Just as random acts of kindness are important, it is also important to be kind to yourself. Telomeres (talked about earlier) also get longer with compassion practice. To learn some practices for cultivating more compassion, refer to the Whole Health handout "[Compassion Practice.](#)"
- **Forgive.** One of the most powerful things that can help us grow is to free ourselves through the power of forgiveness. This is not about saying that bad things that happened to you do not matter, it is about freeing yourself from those things so that

they no longer have the power to hurt you. Reference the Whole Health handout, "[Forgiveness](#)," to learn more.

- **Bring more humor and laughter into your life.** Research shows what we all know – humor and laughter are good for us. To learn why, and how to bring both into your life more, refer to the handout, "[Laughter Heals](#)."

For you to consider:

- Did something in this handout especially catch your attention?
- Are you interested in working on Personal Development? If so, where do you want to focus?
- What will be your first goal? When will you start working toward this goal? How?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Veteran Health Administration	A variety of Whole Health handouts on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal Development • Mindful Awareness • Family, Friends, and Coworkers 	https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp
VA "Whole Health" website	Video "A Patient Centered Approach to Personal Development," 9 th video in "Components of Health and Well-Being" video series	https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/video/video-downloads.asp

This handout was written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Eugene Lee MD, RYT, Academic Integrative Health Fellow, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on two documents for clinicians: 1) the overview, "Personal Development," written by Janice Singles, PsyD and Shilagh Mirgain, PhD and 2) "Passport to Whole Health: A Personal Health Planning Reference Manual," written by J. Adam Rindfleisch, MPhil, MD. The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.

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